

Transforming Power Relations: The Invisible Revolution

by Miki Kashtan

Nonviolent Communication provides specific tools to empower ourselves and others to live more in line with our values and deeper needs. When we do that, we become more effective in relating to ourselves, other faculty, and staff, and we can contribute more to students' ability to feel connected and energized.

"NVC is wonderful and I can see how much it can enhance my personal life," said Cynthia,¹ during an introductory workshop. "But there's no way you can possibly apply this in school." Cynthia, a bilingual schoolteacher, is very committed to the success of her 2nd grade students. Many of Cynthia's students don't speak fluent English and struggle with the requirements of the school system. "My students need structure and discipline," she added. "Without it, they'll never make it in a culture they don't know. If I let go of rules and negotiate with them about every little thing, they won't be able to function."

"Trying to develop mutual relationships will open up a can of worms for me," said Steve. "The high school students I teach have been told what to do and how to do it for years. If I invite them to talk about their feelings and to engage in learning because they want to, not because they have to, they won't learn anything at all."

"That's right," said Joan, a middle school teacher, "and my principal will never go for it. He's very formal and can't stand any talk of feelings. He has his own ideas about how things should run in the school. There's no way that he'd be open to hearing anything from me."

These kinds of expressions are common when educators first learn about NVC. Their language may differ, but their conclusions are the same: They think that NVC can only be applied in the context of equal power.

Cynthia, Steve, and Joan are intuiting something deep and true. What they recognize, even if they find it hard to articulate, is that the NVC consciousness shift is at odds with the assumptions on which most of our schools and social institutions are built.

Beyond a certain limited application, the use of NVC requires a radical shift in consciousness. NVC is a dialogue process aimed at a particular form of consensus: solutions to meet both parties' needs. Using this form of dialogue as the primary mode of interaction requires a deep trust that people enjoy giving freely. It also requires an abiding commitment to attend to the needs of other people. When we are equally concerned about others' needs as we are about our own, we make it possible for them to give joyfully. What makes it possible to say YES from the heart is the knowledge that we are free to say NO without suffering consequences. Entering into NVC dialogue means choosing to model this quality of care and connection whether or not others do.

Staying in dialogue is no small feat. It is hard to remember, as NVC suggests, that other people's actions, no matter how painful to us, are simply attempts to meet their needs. It requires reminding ourselves, again and again, of a crucial point: People will prefer to meet their needs in ways that don't harm others.



On the deepest level, we are called to believe in an article of faith that has been central to progressive and holistic educators: that there are ample means to meet everyone's basic needs. Through meaningful dialogue that creates trust and connection, we can meet more people's needs more peacefully and more fully.

Our culture continually bombards us with endless versions of a very different message: that what motivates people are extrinsic rewards and fear of negative consequences. The collective belief that human beings must be controlled and punished leads us to create institutions that constrain, control, and manipulate people. It predisposes us to create educational systems like the ones we have at present, where control, discipline, reward, and punishment are the norm, and where choice, spontaneity, curiosity, and inquiry are frowned upon (Tyson 1999; Simon 2001).

The tragedy of the conventional approach to education lies in its effectiveness. Conventional socialization creates human beings who behave in ways that appear to lend evidence to the very beliefs about people that give rise to these institutions in the first place. Moreover, the prevalence of such beliefs and practices renders invisible the alternatives. Finally, rewards and punishment, blame and criticism, and the lack of meaningful choice common

in the school system create apathy, despair, and cynicism. It is a small miracle that anyone emerges from such "education" with a vision of an alternative world and with trust in the possibility of creating it.

Needs, Power, and Domination

As Audre Lorde (1984) noted, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change." Transcending the pitfall of recreating the very thing we are trying to change depends on understanding how domination-based consciousness persists in and around us despite our commitment to a progressive, holistic vision.

NVC suggests two key elements essential to creating change even within systems of domination. One is a re-examination of our deepest assumptions about human needs and motivation; the other, and related, element is an understanding of power and our ways of using it. Our goal, with NVC, is use of power that enables all to meet their needs without creating harm.

A key premise of NVC is that human beings share the same basic set of needs. Aside from the obvious ones, such as air, food, and shelter, other common human needs are autonomy, respect, expression, fulfillment, empathy, closeness, mutual recognition, inspiration, and meaningful contribution.² NVC distinguishes between needs and strategies. Needs are timeless, abstract, and common to all people. Strategies, on the other hand, are the almost infinite array of actions, thoughts, objects, resources, and plans we use to try to meet needs.

NVC is based on the recognition that human needs are not in conflict with each other; only strategies can be in conflict. Through ensuring that both parties hear and connect fully with each other's needs, we look together for strategies that would meet as many of those needs as possible for all parties involved.

In this spirit, consider Cynthia's statement that her students "need discipline and structure." As I see it, she is actually describing her strategies to meet her needs which, though unnamed, most likely include her need to contribute, to connect to others in ways that make a difference. When her students move around in class, make faces, or joke with each other, these are their strategies to try to meet their needs, perhaps for finding more meaning and satisfaction in their experience of school, or for greater autonomy in making choices about their time. Through NVC dialogue, Cynthia and her students can discover, together, what all of their needs are, and find strategies to meet them.



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Power can be defined as having the capacity to take effective action to meet needs. Effective action entails having both material and emotional access to strategies to meet needs. Traditional views include as a core aspect of power the capacity to coerce others to give us what we want even if it doesn't meet their needs (Weber 1946). Within the NVC framework we call this power-over. But we also recognize and cultivate another form of power we call power-with: the capacity to meet our needs in a way that allows and invites others to meet their needs, thereby enabling us to meet more of our needs in the long run. The practice of NVC-like other practices adopted by holistic educators-seeks to build a basis on which we can increase our power-with others.

Thus, for example, the more Cynthia can hear, understand, and empathize with her students' needs behind their actions, the more power she has with them. Her understanding and empathy conveys to them that their needs are seen, and that they also matter. When students are heard in this way, they tend to be more open to working together to find strategies to address their needs and others' needs-in this instance, Cynthia's. Time and again, educators are surprised to find the wealth of wisdom and creativity that children can exhibit in solving problems when they understand everyone's needs.

In a world based on domination, the options for strategies to meet needs are drastically narrowed. When we are separated from each other, we cannot work together to find strategies that work for both of us. When conflict arises, even with people we ordinarily trust, we lose our capacity to imagine creative strategies to meet needs. When we have been trained to believe that our needs are at odds with others' needs, we can easily resort to the use of power-over regardless of our general spiritual and political beliefs.

Power-over is born of the combination of two key assumptions of domination systems. One is the assumption of scarcity of means. The other is the belief that the primary motivation of human beings is to try to satisfy their every impulse, no matter the consequences to self or others.

On a personal level, scarcity means having to fight with each other to get our needs met. On a societal level, scarcity means we must create some mechanism for distributing resources, and we have every incentive to justify any resulting inequality.

In the resulting domination systems we are either dominators who can meet our needs at the expense of others' needs, or we are subordinates who lack the power to meet our needs effectively except through the grace of those who dominate us. We cannot see each other as fully human in either case, and thus cannot enjoy or give each other the key human experience of mutual recognition. Growing up, mostly, without this experience (Benjamin 1988, chaps. 1 and 2), we are primed to obey or control, and can switch and adapt to both sets of roles with uncanny ease.³

Consider again Cynthia's situation. Out of her great desire to contribute to her students' ability to function in society, she may employ strategies that are at odds with her students' needs for meaning, satisfaction, and autonomy. Ironically, Cynthia's actions may not support her own commitment to empower her students. This is not because Cynthia doesn't care about their needs, or even because of any particular belief about the virtue of punishment and reward. Rather, it is because she may not trust that children can productively participate in deciding what and how they will study, or doesn't see a way to tap into their natural wonder and interest, or because of the tremendous pressures attendant on existing classroom structure. As Thomas Kelly (1992) suggests, "In hierarchical and repressive structures supported by a culture of competitive individualism, the availability and apparent necessity of punitive power is ever-present."

Joan, on the other hand, is in a position of subordination to her principal. She is very excited about innovative approaches to education to engage her students meaningfully. But when she tried to broach the topic with her principal, he adamantly opposed her suggestions on the grounds that children wouldn't really learn what they need to learn if their interest guides the curriculum in any way. Joan backed off without seeing



what his needs are, or that she shares those needs despite the difference in strategies. Like Joan, the principal most likely wants to contribute to children's learning. Like Joan, he probably cares about order and manageability, and is concerned about the success of programs. Understanding both his needs and hers she can then see him again as human and work with him to address his concerns and still create innovation.

How do we learn the art of dialogue when we are primed to respond to relationships by imposing our needs or giving up on them as soon as conflict exists or seems to be brewing? The challenge is enormous: in each moment of conflict we are called upon to undo and transform the core assumptions we were taught, and take a leap of faith into trusting the possibility of attending to all parties' needs. How do we acquire the capacity to hold everyone's needs as equally important? How do we learn to connect deeply enough with each other's needs that we find a strategy that meets both?

Lisa, a school principal, learned about NVC through a friend, and came to a workshop with the desire to improve her own personal life. She quickly realized the potential of NVC and decided to bring the training into her school. While preparing for this transition, I worked with Lisa to coach her on her own communication with staff at the school. Lisa, like many of us, was deeply conditioned to seek harmony and avoid conflict. For the first several months, most of what we worked on was how easily she could forget to hear the other person and/or to express what she wanted. Paradoxically, we discovered that at times it was easier for her to make and enforce decisions than to express openly what was important to her. Imposing our wishes using power-over when we can do so may be less scary than revealing what we want openly and risking the ensuing conflict if we equalize power.

Now, a year later, Lisa is much more confident in her ability to express herself and hear others in times of conflict. She is more and more willing to ask for what she wants at times when she used to give up without trying. She is surprised at how much more often her needs are met, in ways that are more satisfying to her than coercing or manipulating others. She now sees her role as guiding the decision-making process rather than making the decisions. Making a full choice in the face of fear of consequences requires great emotional strength, sometimes even a willingness to suffer consequences wholeheartedly.

Even when her needs are not met, Lisa is more alive and hopeful than ever. She recognizes the tremendous value of holding on to her needs, and seeing the beauty in them, even when she doesn't immediately see a way to meet them.

Lisa regularly brings up issues with staff and mediates conflicts between teachers. She has successfully navigated complicated interactions with her own supervisor at the school district. Prior to learning NVC, she would have been terrified to express herself in those situations for fear of losing her job or of being ridiculed.

When we try to bring the use of NVC to the context of power-over relations, the challenge is even bigger than in the personal encounter. The social processes and social structures around us continually reinforce the premises of domination. The task of using and modeling NVC in such systems is to imagine power-with relationships into being regardless of what the systemic conditions are.

As Kreisberg (1992, 9) has noted, teachers occupy a particularly painful dual role. In their relationships with students, "they are central figures of authority and control." But when dealing with school administration and school districts, "they are remarkably isolated and often strikingly powerless." Few roles in society require a person to constantly engage others from both ends of the dominance/submission polarity.

As we become more aware of the painful costs of the use of power-over tactics, we become more willing to experiment with foregoing punishments and rewards. And as we become more aware of how difficult this process of unlearning and relearning is, we also, hopefully, move more closely towards what Sharon Salzburg calls "loving kindness"—with others and with ourselves.



Empowering Others to Make Their Own Choices

Trying to get students to do what we want out of fear, guilt, shame, or the desire for reward is harmful to everyone. Students will either submit to us or rebel. But they will most likely not enjoy doing what we want, and we will not enjoy our interactions with them. Human connection does not thrive in schools where such conditions exist. When we resort to power-over, our own experience is one of frustration and exhaustion at trying to maintain connection, be treated with respect, and feel a sense of efficacy in our choices.

Learning to have power-with our students means empowering them to say NO to us. Only then can we experience the magical beauty of hearing a YES that comes from true choice instead of a "should." Paradoxically, if we let go of the outcome, and are open to dialogue with the "NO" that we may receive, the results will often surprise us.

Linda, a first grade teacher in a California school, experienced this recently. Children in her school were engaging in a game that delighted them no end: pulling their elbows back through their sleeves and down to their sides so that only their wrists extend from the sleeves. This silly look appeared to be contagious despite the danger of not being able to break a fall with their hands (indeed one child suffered a concussion from doing this). No amount of reciting safety rules, threats of punishment, or other coercive measures resulted in any change. As soon as adults were out of sight, the children resumed their game.

One day Linda decided to try something different. After she approached one leader of this activity and invited him to talk to her privately, the following dialogue ensued:

Linda: When I saw you pull your arms into your sleeves, I felt really alarmed because I was afraid you might fall and hurt yourself. Your safety really matters to me. Would you be willing to stop this game?

Student: I was only being silly.

Linda: Are you scared right now, and want to make sure I understand you didn't mean any harm?

Student: Yeah.

Linda: You really just want to have fun and enjoy yourself?

Student: Yeah. I'm being careful.

Linda: Are you wanting me to understand that you are also concerned about safety, and want to be trusted about it?

(Student nods without speaking).

Linda (after a pause): I am still really worried about this game, and I'm not comfortable with you guys continuing to play it because I don't trust that everyone will be safe. I really care about you. I'm wondering if we can find some other ways of having fun that are not as scary to me?

There was no demand, no threat of punishment, and no coercion. Linda was clearly open to listen to why he might want to continue to play this game. When he received this understanding in the form of Linda's attempts to guess what was alive in him, he was able to connect with her feelings and needs, and willingly agreed to stop. Knowing that his safety mattered to Linda, and seeing that she was open to hearing "NO"



in response to her request, he was moved to agree from a different place.

Following this one conversation with Linda, this student has not resumed this behavior at home or in school. Indeed, no one else has been doing it, either. Such is the effect of power-with: The shift he experienced during this interaction was profound enough to have lasting results.

What would have happened had the boy not shifted easily? How do we interact with others, especially children, when we believe that their actions are not meeting our needs, or theirs, without trying to coerce or punish them? How can we remember to hold their needs as they experience them as dear as our own needs and beliefs about their needs? How can we integrate the knowledge that any solution that doesn't meet their needs will backfire sooner or later?

As we experiment with using NVC in the school, we will develop our own answers to these difficult questions at our own time and pace. We will need to cultivate our capacity to express our own feelings, needs, and requests. We will need to empathize with children, even when we disagree with what they're doing. This will help us to remember their needs and communicate to them that we are seeking to meet our needs in ways that work for them as well.

This process is at the same time rewarding and challenging. The reward is not just that we get what we want more of the time with less cost. Rather, it's the experience of the process itself. We learn about ourselves and others while trying to connect, and we connect at a heart level that's rarely available otherwise.

There is unimaginable beauty in the unexpected intimacy and the aliveness that come about as we practice this. When we begin, often the challenge seems bigger than the reward. The process of learning requires considerable patience for ourselves and others as we engage in the process. Over time, we reach connection more easily and fully, and our success itself provides enough motivation to keep going.

Practicing the tools of NVC entails letting go of coercion and the use of force except when life is endangered. Even then, NVC suggests using force only to protect, not to punish, and resuming dialogue as soon as danger is not imminent. At the same time, staying in dialogue does not imply agreeing to what children want to do. Rather, our dialogic stance invites others, including children, to consider everyone's needs. As we model our capacity to care for children's needs, and our willingness to express our own needs and ask for what we want, we teach children an important lesson: that their needs matter no more and no less than anyone else's around them. It is through being treated with respect, consideration, and empathy that they will learn to treat others similarly.

Beyond Submission and Rebellion

Although many children and teachers find ways to stay human with each other within, and despite, conventional school systems, this is far from the norm. It takes great emotional fortitude for children to recognize that there is tremendous care and thought behind consequences, rewards, and punishments. Some children are able to find or retain their intrinsic motivations and passions within the most difficult conditions; but for the most part, systems of reward and punishment result in few options other than submission or rebellion.

We submit, when we do, out of fear of the consequences, not because we particularly care about the person in authority, or are aware of their needs. In the context of power relations, we are rarely able to hear what another asks of us as anything other than a demand. We rebel, when we do, because of our need for autonomy, for being able to make our own choices regardless of what others tell us we must do. Rebellion may be the only way we can experience a sense of power. However, regardless of how sweet it may feel in the moment, rebellion is not ordinarily an expression of true choice. We are still giving the other person the power to define our choices. True choice is dramatically different from acting either out of fear or out of scorn of consequences. When we are connected to our own needs-not a "should" in either direction-we will respond to what we are asked to do with choice in the moment.



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Making a full choice in the face of fear of consequences requires great emotional strength, sometimes even a willingness to suffer consequences wholeheartedly. This spiritual fortitude is at the core of nonviolence as practiced by Gandhi and King. Sometimes this stance would mean agreeing with what we are asked to do, because of recognizing that it would meet our own needs (be it for generosity, contribution, peace, or any other need). At other times it would mean standing our ground while maintaining dialogue with the person in authority, offering empathy and expression of our own feelings and needs with the goal of meeting both sets of needs as much as possible.

Just as much as the freedom to say “YES” depends on having the option to say “NO,” we cannot truly choose “NO” from the heart if we are unable to experience the possibility of choosing “YES” to meet our own needs, separately from those of the person in authority.

As difficult as it is for us to stand up to and connect with those in authority, it is even more difficult for our students to do so with us. When we begin to practice NVC, then, we can see our own position in a new way, as a window into the possibility of seeing the humanity of everyone. Our struggles with our students can increase our compassion for our supervisors. Our challenges with those in authority over us can add to our understanding of our students. When we are able to see everyone’s humanity, we step outside the familiar set of relationships, and get a glimpse of what truly life-serving institutions could look like, when everyone’s needs matter and are taken into account.

Lessons of Hope

Change is not necessarily forthcoming when we begin to bring new consciousness and practices into our school experience: Those around us may still often respond to us based on assumptions of domination, as Sura Hart’s essay in this issue about the Skarpnacks Free School suggests. Similarly, when Lisa first wanted to introduce NVC to her school, I cautioned her about the importance of making sure people took the training because they wanted to, not because they had to. Lisa completely agreed with me. Both of us, however, underestimated the power of institutions to shape consciousness. Lisa, unaware of how easy it would be to hear her invitation as a demand, was thrilled to see the level of response, as it contributed to her sense of hope and possibility. I was worried because I didn’t trust the authenticity of the choice.

On the day of the training, almost the entire staff was present. They had heard Lisa say that this training was voluntary. But they had few if any experiences in life, including with Lisa, to prepare them for being able to experience the option of saying NO. Ironically, the net result was similar to what teachers experience in a typical classroom: those who didn’t want to learn made it very hard for those who did to learn anything. This day was so painful for everyone that I assumed this would be the last time NVC would be used by the staff in this school.

But I also underestimated the power of vision to inspire others. After the training, a much smaller group of teachers and counselors approached Lisa and asked if it would be possible to have further training. This group has been coming to ongoing practice sessions for a year. Bit by bit, they are practicing how they can bring NVC to bear on their classroom and faculty relationships.

The dean of students, for example, is fully committed to connection based on empathy with the students’ experience, and expression of her feelings and needs. Her current challenge is how to respond to teachers who insist on getting students punished. She is struggling to recognize that their insistence on punishment is



an expression of some of their needs—perhaps for reliable order in their classroom, for living in harmony with their own values, or for contributing to the children’s ability to live productive lives in this society.

Some teachers are experimenting with involving students in decision making about classroom behavior. They are also trying to find, with increasing success, ways other than punishment and reward to respond to difficult situations. Several are starting to teach their students about NVC.

Some “problem students” have magically come to acquire friends and become integrated into the group after hearing the entire class describe the effect of their actions on others, while also being given voice to express their own experience and concerns. Ripple effects are starting, too. More and more, faculty and staff who have not participated in NVC training are approaching Lisa and others and asking them to help with conflicts.

Lisa regularly participates in the NVC practice sessions and shares her own vulnerability with the teachers, counselors, and paraprofessionals present, thereby contributing to a sense of trust and community. This small group, in a large, regular public school, is living proof that even in difficult circumstances, a commitment to dialogue is possible. Equally important, this experiment shows that, over time, trust increases, and with it a sense that alternatives exist that may be more productive, life-serving, and enjoyable than the existing systems are.

I want to stress again that using NVC is not a panacea that magically transforms how we will relate to students, other educators, administrators, and ourselves. Nor does it always enable us to fulfill our goals. But it does give us tools for participating in fulfilling the vision of holistic education, an education in which the needs of each child are cherished and in which children are nurtured to act in joy, compassion, and mutuality. We live this vision by creating communities in which all of our needs are seen as beautiful expressions of our humanity—and in which we work toward meeting all of our needs peacefully. As we do so, we create, in a microcosm, the world we dream of bequeathing to our children.

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Endnotes

1. All names used in this article are fictitious.
 2. This is not a complete list of needs, and only serves as illustration. For a fuller discussion of the theory of needs, which underlies this approach, see Chapter 9 in Kashtan (2000). See also Marshall Rosenberg (1999).
 3. As an example, consider a study conducted in Stanford in the 1970s (Zimbardo et al. 1975) in which individuals were randomly assigned to being guards or inmates in a simulation which lasted six days. The study was intended to last two weeks, but was stopped because both guards and inmates assumed their roles so deeply that the researchers were concerned about their well being. "Guards" were being mean and abusive to the "inmates," and the latter took on behaviors characteristic of real-life prisoners, such as passivity and deviousness.
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